

The growing angst in rural-urban relations

How agricultural journalists face an expanding menu of issues

By

Jim Evans and Owen Roberts

What an array we see today

It seems likely that, beyond the local level, societies everywhere have never had more conversations about agriculture, what it produces and how it affects the public welfare. Front pages and lead stories abound with what we once called a farm story. Now, it's a food story. Or a science story. Or a trade story. And suddenly, everyone's a farm writer, and a farm-news consumer. That brings with it new opportunities to tell farming's story. But it also ushers in new challenges, introducing urban (and some rural) people to traditional farm issues. Some of them are tough to explain, and they're causing confusion and downright angst among the public.

IFAJ members may have a new role here, communicating about an array of topics. Food prices and shortages, use of genetically modified crops, threats of bird flu and mad cow disease, farming methods, pesticide policies, food safety and regulation, international trade, labeling and tracking of foods, animal care, factory farms, organic foods, blight warnings, biofuels and dozens of other issues rage away at all levels. In our teaching and research activities over the years, we have never seen such a broad and high-profile agenda of rural-urban-farm conversations. More than 1,000 documents in the Agricultural Communications Documentation Center identify and examine them in various countries.

We know that rural-urban relations have always been lively in various national and cultural settings. For example, agricultural historian Paul H. Johnstone observed that the early leadership of agriculture in America planted the seed of an intellectual tradition that had two parts. "The first of these was the idea of progress and scientific improvement," he said. "The second was the literary agrarianism derived originally from classic antiquity." That sounds thick. But elements of this agrarian creed included the concepts of economic independence of the farmer, the fundamental importance of agriculture and the idea that agricultural life was the natural (therefore good) life. Rural

and urban residents have long jostled about their values, images and the qualities of their lives. They still do.

Take, for example, a "rural image" issue that Gene Logsdon shared some years ago in a *Farm Journal* article. This child's chant was from the 1930s:

"I'm a hayseed,
I'm a hayseed,
and my ears
are full of pigweed.
How they flop
in stormy weather.
Gosh oh hemlock,
tough as leather."

Classic agrarian themes still resonate. However, tremendous social changes have broadened the conversations. Some observers emphasize the economic and social decoupling of agriculture from other parts of society. They point to low public awareness of the food enterprise, mutual mistrust (for example, consumer concerns about food quality) and increasing rural-urban confrontation and conflict. They point to changing farming methods and ownership structures that threaten the family farm and rural communities, suburbanization of the countryside, restructuring of governmental regulation, globalization of the food industry and other changes.

Guelph researchers John Smithers, Alun E. Joseph and Matthew Armstrong noted in a recent *Journal of Rural Studies* article that fast-changing agriculture in most developing economies over the past half century has been "hurtling forward in order to stand still."

If the angst is growing, let's examine it

Let's take a fresh look at rural-urban relations, from the perspective of agricultural journalists and communicators, internationally. This feature is the first in a four-part series on which we are collaborating in an effort to help IFAJ members, and others, strengthen rural-urban relations.

- Part 1. Rural-urban issues that call for coverage today
- Part 2. Why rural-urban reporting gets so difficult and challenging
- Part 3. Ideas and approaches for agricultural journalists and communicators
- Part 4. Unique roles of independent journalists and special-interest communicators

We hope you enjoy these features and find them useful. We also hope you'll join in with your perspectives, because we suspect you too are sensing a change. If you're not, let's hear about that, too.

Touching every country, and at many levels

Here are just a few examples of reports during the past five years about rural-urban issues in countries throughout the world. They are in the ACDC collection:

- Africa - "Our major finding is that living standards in rural areas lag far behind those in urban areas."
- Argentina - Research reveals Argentinean agribusiness must do more to promote itself to the general public.
- Brazil - Evidence of land struggle in the face of urbanization in the eastern Brazilian Amazon.
- Britain – 22 per cent of 1,073 surveyed adults did not know bacon and sausages originate from farms.
- Canada - Cottages versus farms, malls versus land, urban cash versus rural clout cited as issues in Canada's "next culture war."
- Guatemala and India - Urban media not reporting about rural areas.
- Mali - Expanding populations add to local conflict between farmers and herders as drought hit grazing land.
- New Zealand - Farmers' views about their public image.
- Norway - Differing producer/consumer perceptions about organic farming and foods.
- Poland - Conflict between the primary economy (agriculture) and secondary economy (industry and services).
- Sri Lanka - Frictions between farmers and the government about land purchases.
- USA - Fertilizer and manure contamination of lakes and streams in Iowa.
- Yemen - Urban water-supply drilling program strongly opposed by the local rural population.

Want some story ideas? Here are 100-plus rural-urban issues you might cover

Listed below you will find some types of rural-urban, consumer-producer issues that invite coverage in various settings, times and places. For your convenience, they are organized within categories that various researchers have used. You can tell, however, that some topics cut across these categories.

Differences in what people know and believe

Agricultural trade - systems, policies, methods, implications
Animal rights and welfare
Bio-based energy - needs, sources, value, sustainability
Communities - relationships with producers and food production
Development priorities - communities, other levels
Environment - as related to food and agriculture
Farmers and farm workers
Farming methods (e.g., organic, use of pesticides and fertilizers, diversity of enterprise
Food - characteristics and processing (e.g., genetic modification, irradiation)
Food - distribution and pricing
Food - safety, risk, security
Food - supply, availability, convenience, quality, nutrition
Food and social justice
Food systems - progress, direction, diversity, credibility/trust, sustainability
Global/local dimensions of food and agriculture - trends, values, policies
Government - role, regulation and policies related to food and agriculture
Images of the farming and the food-producing enterprise
International trade related to food, feed and other agricultural products
Knowledge - science-based relative to indigenous/traditional (value, uses)
Labeling of foods - need, value, methods
Land - ownership, uses
Nature of farming
Nutrition and diets
Obesity - causes, approaches to addressing it
Organic food - role, nutrition, pricing, environmental connections
Origins of food - importance, implications (e.g., food miles)
Perceptions of space and rural landscapes
Performance of producers and others in the food complex
Rural poverty - awareness, causes, implications, policies, approaches
Technologies - role, use and socio-economic value in agricultural development

Lifestyle issues

Chemical drift from field operations
Diets and changing eating patterns
Diseases as connected with food safety
Dogs, livestock and other animals out of place

Dust
Health, as related to food and agriculture
Lights as distractions
Noise (e.g., farm equipment late night or early morning)
Obesity
Odors
Pests (e.g., flies from livestock operations, mosquitoes from water sources)
Trash and litter
Vandalism
Visual attractiveness

Equity issues

Access to information technologies and services (e.g., digital divide)
Assets and opportunities (e.g., those who have or have not)
Community services - (e.g., rural compared with urban areas)
Education systems and quality
Health services
Literacy
Marginalization of participants and enterprises in the food complex
Rights to patentable knowledge related to food and agriculture

Infrastructure issues

Community wellbeing and development
Concentration of agribusiness enterprise - trends, socio-economic implications, outlook
Concentration of farm enterprise - trends, socio-economic implications, outlook
Crime protection
Drift and disappearance of producers from the land
Equitable income of agricultural producers in relation to their societies
Family farms - trends, features, roles, importance/value
Globalization of food systems
Government - agricultural/food policies, farm subsidies
Government relationships - trends, effects (e.g., European Union)
Land use - policies and issues (public and private lands)
Local, regional, global orientations
Road maintenance
Road damage (e.g., heavy farm equipment)
Road and traffic safety (e.g., slow-moving equipment)
Urbanization and urban sprawl

Natural resource issues

Air pollution, as related to agriculture
Climate change - effects on food and agriculture
Conservation of natural resources
Environmental movements
Environmental quality
Forest ecosystems

Forest use (e.g., deforestation)
Organic foods and farming
Relationships - agriculture, nature and environment
Sustainability of farming methods
Water - supply, quality, use, management
Wetland - policies, methods for maintenance
Wildlife and habitat

Policy issues

Anti-trust
Conservation
Farm labor
Farm programs
Food processing
Food inspection and safety
Food labeling
Food quality
Food safety
Food security
Global food policy
Government jurisdictions
Land reform
Land use
Loans and finance
Market regulation/deregulation
Migration
Natural resource management
Reapportionment
Trade negotiations and policies - local, national, international
Water - access, use, quality

Property rights and wealth distribution issues

Development rights - fairness, equity
Liability
Trespassing

Your thoughts and suggestions? What other, or new, rural-urban issues would you add?

Please send them to us at evansj@uiuc.edu and owen@uoguelph.ca.
Thank you.

About the authors:

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(This professional development feature is produced through a partnership of IFAJ and the Agricultural Communications Documentation Center, University of Illinois.)